

Yotam Gazit

GPGS Grant Research Report

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## Ownership of History: Narratives of the Minamata Disease through Museums

### 1. Background

In 1951, a fertilizer factory in the small fishing town of Minamata began dumping industrial waste containing methylmercury into the local bay. Five years later, the Minamata residents began displaying various severe neurological symptoms that would eventually be discovered to be caused by mercury poisoning, termed “Minamata Disease”. This discovery would lead to a prolonged legal and political battle spanning decades between the affected citizens, the Chisso Corporation who ran the factory, and the government, at both the local and national levels. The case of the Minamata Disease was one of Japan’s first major post-war political crisis, which served as an example of the so-called “Iron Triangle” of Japanese politics, in which the government, the state bureaucracy, and private corporations worked together to protect their mutual interests.

Even nearly 70 years after the fact, the handling of the Minamata Disease remains a controversial topic, with different parties espousing different narratives about it. This paper will be an examination of these competing narratives, as seen through two museums created to commemorate the victims of the disease. The first, the Minamata Disease Museum (水俣病歴史考証館, “The Minamata Disease History Investigation

Museum”), was created and run by Soshisha since 1988, the organization of survivors and bereaved families, and portrays a narrative focused on the lives and suffering of those affected by the disease, and their struggle for recognition and compensation. In stark contrast stands the Minamata Disease Municipal Museum (水俣病資料館, “The Minamata Disease Document Museum”), established by the provincial government in 1993, which places a greater emphasis on the work done to solve the pollution crisis and an environmentalist message for the future.

Through the examples of these two institutions, this research project intends show how the memorialization of history remains undetermined and ‘competitive’ far after the actual events, and the ways in which parties of interest creates narratives that suit their needs and beliefs, either overtly, as in the case of the Soshisha museum, or indirectly, as in the case of the municipal museum.

## 2. Research Done Prior to Reception of Grant

This project began as a term paper submitted to Professor Sven Saaler’s seminar in Memory of History in contemporary Japan in the autumn semester of 2024. Due to geographic limitations, I was unable to visit the museums in person and thus based my analysis on their websites. Both museums have robust websites detailing their exhibitions and offering most of their information brochures as PDF links. Furthermore, the websites themselves offered certain insights into the museums’ narratives and goals that wouldn’t be clear from visiting their physical locations. For example, the Soshisha museum has two separate websites, one in Japanese and one in English, with different content and

designs aimed at different demographics, while the municipal museum had a single website with multiple language settings, but a uniform design and content selection.

However, just as the museums' websites offer information not found in their physical exhibitions, so do the physical exhibitions offer information not found on the websites. Thus, when I decided to develop this term paper into a fully fledged academic article, it seemed clear to me that visiting the museums would be necessary to fully understand the narratives they create.

### 3. Summary of Field Research

After arriving at Minamata City on the evening of August 11<sup>th</sup>, field research began on the morning of the following day, August 12<sup>th</sup>, with a visit to the Soshisha museum. I was fortunate to arrive at the same time as a group of schoolteachers from Tokyo who visited the museum on a study trip of their own. The group graciously allowed me to join them as they were guided by a museum employee, providing me with an opportunity to listen to a presentation of the museum's narrative aimed towards a Japanese, thought not local to the region, audience. On the morning of August 13<sup>th</sup>, I visited the municipal museum. This time, a guided tour was not available, but I was still able to go through the entire exhibition at my leisure. Afterwards, I was able to examine much of the surrounded "Eco Park Minamata" complex which the museum is located within. The public park, built on land reclaimed from the contaminated Minamata Bay, is strongly tied to the narrative which the municipal museum promotes, and can be seen as an extension of the

exhibition. After my tour of the park, I continued to Kagoshima Airport, thus concluding this research trip.

#### 4. Research Results

The primary contribution of this field work to the overall research project is the confirmation of the information available online. Both museums' websites, as well as online information about Eco Park Minamata, proved to be accurate and up to date, thus confirming the validity of my previous research. Beyond this, I was able to make new important findings. At the Soshisha museum, I was able to record a section describing Chisso's involvement in the colonization of Korea, an important and not obvious part of the museums' narrative which was not shown on the website. At the municipal museum, I viewed a 20-minute-long movie describing the entire history of the Minamata Disease, which spelled out the museum's message very directly. Finally, walking through Eco Park Minamata gave credence to the municipality's PR claims of it being a center of city life, as even in the morning hours of a weekday during the height of the August heat, the park was still full of both locals and tourists.